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Gary Y. Okihiro: Common Ground

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CHAPTER 1

West and East

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz is foremost an American fairy tale. The story, briefly, is about how Dorothy, a young Kansas girl, is displaced by a midwestern cyclone, deposited in the land of the Munchkins, and searches for the Wonderful Wizard of Emerald City in Oz, who, she believes, can help her get back to Kansas. On her journey, Dorothy meets and is joined by the Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Cowardly Lion, each of whom seeks something, like Dorothy, from the Wonderful Wizard. When they finally meet the Wizard, they discover that he is a fraud, not a wizard at all but a former circus performer from Omaha, a fellow midwesterner. He, nonetheless, shows how each of his supplicants—the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion—already possess what they had sought, and tells how Glinda the Good, the sorceress of the South, reveals to Dorothy that she, too, already has the means by which to return to Kansas—her silver shoes. After clicking her heels, Dorothy and Toto are transported home to Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. “I’m so glad to be at home again!” exclaims a contented Dorothy in the end.

The book was written, according to its author L. Frank Baum, “solely to pleasure children of today.” But, published in 1900, it was more than a child’s story. It reflected the historical circumstances that swirled around Baum, like the Kansas winds that swept Dorothy and Toto to Munchkin country. Born in central New York in 1856, Baum grew up in a well-to-do home, spent most of his life in Chicago, and moved to Hollywood, where he died in 1919. In writing children’s stories, according to his publicist, Baum sought to move away from a European motif and create a distinctively American genre.¹ Kansas provided that most American of places for Baum.

The American heartland surely sets the stage for this saga, along with its virtues of family and home, companionship, sympathy for the underdog, practicality and common sense, and self-reliance. But it is also juxtaposed with the apparent utopia of Oz. Kansas, we are told at the story's beginning, is a flat, desolate place, a "great gray prairie" without a tree or house in sight. The sun bakes the soil dry, burns the grass, and blisters the paint on the house. "When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young, pretty wife," the story goes. "The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled, now." Uncle Henry, like Aunt Em, "never laughed," and he worked hard from morning till night and rarely spoke.²

In contrast, Oz was filled with bright sunshine and was "a country of marvelous beauty." Instead of the treeless gray of Kansas, there were "lovely patches of green sward all about, with stately trees bearing rich and luscious fruits. Banks of gorgeous flowers were on every hand, and birds with rare and brilliant plumage sang and fluttered in the trees and bushes. A little way off was a small brook, rushing and sparkling along between green banks. . . ." That stark contrast between Kansas and Oz was just one of several dualisms within Baum's story. Oz itself was divided into north and south, east and west, each with their respective witches. His contemporaries no doubt recognized Baum's contrasts and dualisms. Aunt Em and Uncle Henry's condition surely resonated with the plight of the midwestern farmer who not only faced the ravages of nature but also the bondage of eastern capital. Baum was a supporter of the Democratic party's 1896 standard bearer, William Jennings Bryan, who trumpeted the call for the "free coinage of silver" (recollect the color of Dorothy's magical shoes) as beneficial to farmers and the working class, and who opposed the capitalists' "cross of gold." The Tin Woodman had once been a hardworking human being, but, by the very necessity of labor (each swing of his axe had chopped off a part of his body), Eastern witchcraft, or the industrial machine, had transformed his body into metal (smiths had

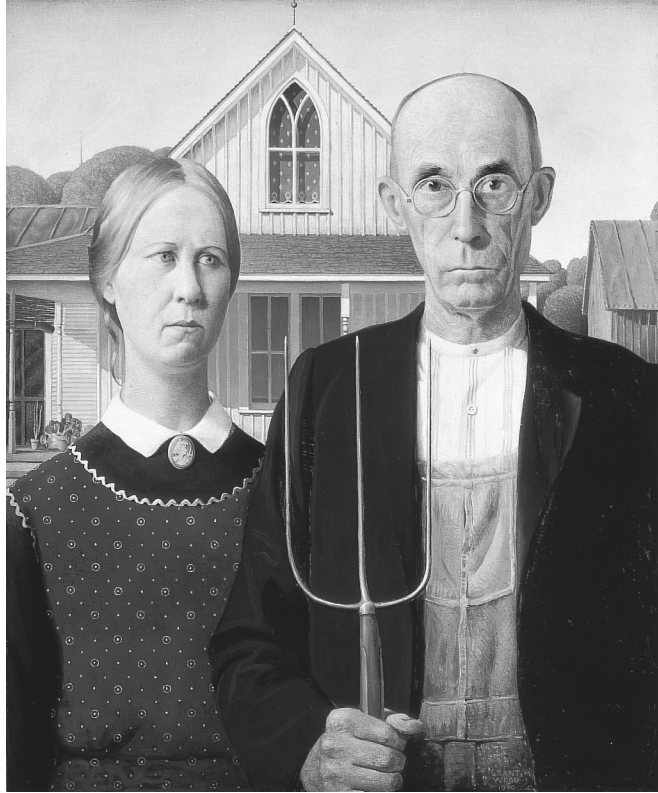


Fig. 1. *American Gothic*, by Grant Wood (1930).

"Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies, with Uncle Henry, who was a farmer, and Aunt Em, who was the farmer's wife. Their house was small. . . . [Aunt Em] was thin and gaunt, and never smiled now. . . . Uncle Henry never laughed. He worked hard from morning till night and did not know what joy was." Quotation from Michael Patrick Hearn (ed.), *The Annotated Wizard of Oz* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1973). *American Gothic* (oil on beaverboard, 74.3 × 62.4 cm) courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection, and VAGA, New York, NY, 1930.934. All rights reserved.

replaced his bodily parts with tin). The urban factory of the East encounters the agrarian ideal of the West.³

The contrasts were more apparent than real. It was like the discoveries made by Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion: what seemed real was illusion, and what they had set out to find they already possessed. Dorothy wears

the shoes that take her home, the Scarecrow exhibits much common sense, the Tin Woodman weeps after stepping on a beetle, and the Cowardly Lion learns that fear is normal. What appears absent is really present. Similarly, the plainness and gray of Kansas only seemed at odds with the greenness and light of Oz; they also bore like features. The cornfields, peach trees, crows, beetles, wildcats, storks, and field mice of Kansas populate the landscape of Oz, and both places are rural and filled with farmers and woodsmen. And despite the misery of Kansas, Dorothy comes to the conclusion after her wonderful mystical journey that “there is no place like home.” “No matter how dreary and gray our homes are,” Dorothy explains to the Scarecrow, “we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful.” The utopian attractions and possibilities of Oz were always present in Kansas and the American heartland.⁴

Two of the most persistent and pervasive myths of America’s past are the idea of the West and the idea of the West as the nation’s frontier. America’s history, indeed its uniqueness and national identity, is rooted within that imaginary space, the unturned sod, the “virgin land” of the portable frontier that moved from the Atlantic seaboard to the Alleghenies, to the Mississippi, the Great Plains, the Rockies, and California’s golden shore, and to the Pacific and Asia. According to the myth, that “westerling”—imagining and mapping, expanding and conquering, settling and building—tamed a howling wilderness, brought light to darkness, and molded a “new man.” No longer a European, he was an American, as original and distinctive as the environment that shaped him.

In the West, along the frontier or the divide between civilization and barbarism, “the wilderness masters the colonist” wrote historian Frederick Jackson Turner, giving him “coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inventiveness,” a “practical, inventive turn of mind,” a “dominant individualism,” and a “buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.” These were among the core American virtues that were distilled within the crucible of the frontier.⁵ A young, assistant professor at the

University of Wisconsin at the time, Turner outlined his frontier hypothesis in a paper presented at the 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, coinciding with that city's hosting of the 1893 World's Fair. The timing and place of those events were propitious. The temper of the times—as Turner had written earlier in an observation that applies equally to historians and storytellers—conditions the choice of historical subject matters and their interpretations. “Each age,” he had perceptively declared, “tries to form its own conception of the past. Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to conditions uppermost in its own time.”⁶

The late nineteenth century, as is evident in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, saw the rise of agrarian populism—the revolt of western farmers against the perceived tyranny of eastern capital that was fueled by class as well as by regional antagonisms and interests. Chicago's selection over cities of the eastern establishment as the site for the 1893 World's Fair was significant, along with its theme—a celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's “discovery” of the Americas. And though by 1893 the course of empire, with its frontiers to America's south in Cuba and Puerto Rico and to its west in the Philippines and Hawaii, had yet to be fully run, that destiny of European peoples had long been envisioned, at least since the Republic's founding and, in truth, since Columbus's expedition to India and the regions beyond.

Turner's immediate concern was the report of the 1890 U.S. Census, which declared that because of settlement, “there can hardly be said to be a frontier line.” “The frontier has gone,” in Turner's words, “and with its going has closed the first period of American history.” The frontier's closing, however, meant more than the end of an epoch; it foreshadowed a denial of access to the generative lands that gave Americans their rugged individualism, their unrestrained exuberance, their sinewy toughness. “This, then, is the real situation: a people composed of heterogeneous materials, with diverse and conflicting ideals and social interests, having passed from the task of filling up the vacant spaces of the continent, is now thrown back upon itself,

and is seeking an equilibrium,” explained Turner in an 1896 essay. “The diverse elements are being fused into national unity. The forces of reorganization are turbulent and the nation seems like a witches’ kettle.”⁷

An aspect of that “witches’ kettle” were the diverse and unprecedented masses of immigrants who were streaming to America’s eastern shores during the late nineteenth century. Unlike America’s traditional immigrants, the 25 million who migrated to the United States between 1865 and 1915 did not come from Britain, Ireland, or northern Europe alone, but also from Italy, Greece, Poland, Russia, China, Japan, Korea, India, and the Philippines, and they totaled more than four times the number of those who had arrived during the previous fifty years. They flocked to the Northeast and West, where factories, in cities and fields, were humming, and where barons of industry and agriculture were monopolizing chunks of land, natural resources, and capital, and accumulating great wealth.

Ethnic and class conflicts were commonplace. In 1886 Chicago, in America’s heartland, police killed four strikers, and the next day a bomb killed seven officers and injured sixty-seven people. The Haymarket Square bombing came to symbolize, for many Americans, the imagined threat posed by southern and eastern Europeans, immigrants, radicals, and anarchists. “These people,” a Chicago newspaper reported of the Haymarket strikers, “are not American, but the very scum and offal of Europe.” Americans were not solely concerned with Europe’s “rubbish.” In 1882, four years before Haymarket, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act because, in the words of the Act, “the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof.” In 1894, the American Protective Association, a nativist group committed to stopping the immigrant tide, reportedly had a membership of 500,000, drawn from the Northeast and also from the Midwest.⁸ “Thrown back upon itself,” the nation—a “witches’ kettle”—steamed and boiled and bubbled.

In the glare of these new social realities at the close of the nineteenth century, Turner’s frontier hypothesis is forward-looking

but also nostalgic, drawing upon a myth expressed at least a hundred years earlier during the late eighteenth century. The agrarian tradition, as described by literary scholar Henry Nash Smith, was a self-image that defined what Americans thought about themselves and their past, present, and future. The tradition was inward-looking, distinctly not European, and captured a hankering for and a faith in an inland empire of near-infinite expanse and untapped wealth that exuded from the fecund and blessed land. That species of American nationalism, wrote Smith, was expressed even before America's independence and later in countless "rhapsodies on the West" by visionaries who saw the American interior "as a new and enchanting region of inexpressible beauty and fertility," of stately forests and rich meadows on which roamed vast herds of animals and where a thousand rivers flowed into the mighty Mississippi. And although expansive, the agrarian tradition, noted Smith, "made it difficult for Americans to think of themselves as members of a world community because it has affirmed that the destiny of this country leads her away from Europe toward the agricultural interior of the continent."⁹

Those romantic ideas of the trans-Appalachian West had precedents one hundred years earlier at the close of the eighteenth century, despite indications of a contrary, nonagrarian future evidenced in the rise of British industrialism and America's first modern factory—a spinning mill erected in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in 1790. And like its 1890s version, the agrarian tradition of the 1790s helped galvanize a national identity that in the late eighteenth century contributed to the fall of the Federalists and the rise of the Republicans and Jeffersonian democracy in the election of 1800. The Federalists, who favored government by a powerful elite over a passive citizenry, were tied to Europe, hereditary rule, and the Old World by their opponents, the Republicans, who united disparate groups and classes around the notions of popular sovereignty and democracy that they claimed as distinctively American and native to the New World.¹⁰ It is not surprising, thus, that the singular hero of Jeffersonian democracy was the intrepid, independent pioneer and farmer who

fled Europe, cleared America's forests, settled, cultivated an abundance, and brought forth a new man and nation. And the Republican geographical distinctions of Old World and New World, Europe and America, East and West, paralleled the agrarian tradition's domestic orientations of old and new, the Atlantic seaboard and the interior, East and West, and its associations of rebirth, plenitude, and the American identity with the West.

Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana from France in 1803, doubling the nation's size and extending its western frontier, was in one sense an affirmation of the agrarian ideal. According to Henry Nash Smith, Jefferson was "the intellectual father of the American advance to the Pacific."¹¹ He collected information on Louisiana from the British, Spanish, and French when he served as an American diplomat in Paris from 1784 to 1789, and as President he dispatched Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1803 to find a route to the Pacific "for the purposes of commerce."¹² Although impractical at the time as an economic scheme, Lewis and Clark's expedition, wrote Smith, "lay on the level of imagination; it was drama, it was the enactment of a myth that embodied the future. It gave tangible substance to what had been merely an idea, and established the image of a highway across the continent so firmly in the minds of Americans that repeated failures could not shake it." And when Lewis and Clark camped on the shore of the Pacific in 1805, Smith observed, "They reactivated the oldest of all ideas associated with America—that of a passage to India."¹³

The agrarian tradition found the American identity neither in Europe nor along the nation's teeming eastern seaboard, but within its "vacant" interior called its "heartland." There, among the forests and plains seemingly devoid of humanity (wherein American Indians were included among the wilderness requiring domestication) and diversity, British, Irish, and northern Europeans blended into a distinctive, yet homogeneous, racial and cultural stock—the American. "What then is the American, this new man?" asked French immigrant and American farmer J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in 1782. "He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners,

receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *Alma Mater*. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men."¹⁴ Eighty years later in an essay titled "Walking," Henry David Thoreau wrote of westward migration as symbolic of America's near-limitless reach. "I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe," Thoreau stated, because "the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure" awaited the westward walker, because in the West could be found "an area of equal extent with that occupied by the bulk of our States, so fertile and so rich and varied in its productions, and at the same time so habitable by the European," because the West's mountain air "feeds the spirit and inspires," allowing men to grow "to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically."¹⁵

The belief that the West held transformative powers in shaping and reshaping people provided the rationale for Charles Loring Brace and his New York Children's Aid Society to combat juvenile delinquency by sending wayward youth and "orphans" to the West in the 1850s. Removed from the degenerative influences and temptations of city life, Brace contended, and placed within the virtuous environs of nature and the farm, children who had been deformed and made ill by the unnatural contrivances of the city could be remade and restored to social health. By 1910, the society had sent over 110,000 children.¹⁶ The West, a region of the country but also an idea summoned in the simple yet significant term "the heartland," came to embody the values and virtues of the nation.

By an act of Congress in 1785, the lands west of the Appalachians were surveyed, divided into rectangular grids, and sold in disregard of the natural contours of the land, its diverse environments, and the peoples who lived and moved across its expanses. This Northwest Territory, so named by Congress two years later, eventually came to occupy not only the geographical center of the nation but also its common ground, according to many observers. "To the frontier came an all-American society," wrote a native midwesterner. Yankees and southerners brought

their different cultures and speech with them, and in the melting pot of the Midwest these distinctions vanished. “In time the Southern drawl and the Yankee twang blended into what has been called the ‘general American speech,’ and the heartland towns had a vigorous and friendly character of their own,” he explained. Those midwesterners, like the land that shaped them, were largely homogeneous, the writer continued. “The land rolls on unchanged; farms, towns and cities repeat the same tempo and impression; people use the same idiom and intonation; they share common attitudes and instincts. This entire region has a common history.”¹⁷

The heartland’s location in the middle of the country is more than a geographic phenomenon; it is metaphorical. It is all American, because it is the sum and average of the nation. Midwesterners, according to a historian, know that they are the heart of the continent, and they believe that “the South is backward, the West is a place of extremes, and that the East, although culturally advanced, is effete in character; therefore, all are to be pitied—only midwesterners are true Americans.”¹⁸ The poet Dave Etter offers a humorous rendition of those self-proclaimed virtues of centrality and typicality in his poem, “Henry Lichenwalner: Living in the Middle.”

Here in Alliance, Illinois,
 I’m living in the middle,
 standing on the Courthouse lawn
 in the middle of town,
 in the middle of my life,
 a self-confessed middlebrow,
 a member of the middle class,
 and of course Middle Western,
 the middle, you see, the middle,
 believing in the middle way,
 standing here at midday
 in the middle of the year,
 breathing the farm-fragrant air
 of Sunflower County,

in the true-blue middle
of middle America,
in the middle of my dreams.¹⁹

Of all the nation's regions, a foundational textbook on regionalism declared, "the Middle States may be characterized as the most American of them all. This is not to say that there will not be found in each of the other regions special character traits easily identified as extremely 'American' but that this region combines a larger number than any other region and therefore approximates the first place in any picture of the nation to be envisaged through its major regions." The Midwest, the text's authors explained, epitomizes the two "great motivations" of the nation—migration and westward expansion. It is the ground where Europeans became Americans. "Here were symbol and reality of rivers and forests, of land and prairies, of plain people and democratic patterns, symbols of the American dream. In the quality and number of its people, the nature and number of its occupations, its small industries and great agriculture, in the best examples of balanced industry and agriculture, are typified the heart of America and the backbone of its national framework. And here are American manners and morals, folkways and customs, religion and politics."²⁰

The historian Carl L. Becker summarized some of the salient notions of America's heartland in his essay in praise of Kansas written in 1910 when he was a professor at the University of Kansas. The people of Kansas, he maintained, had shaped a community on "the frontier of human endeavor" based upon "an identity of race, custom, habits, needs; a consensus of opinion in respect to morals and politics. . . . Its people are principally American born, descended from settlers who came mainly from the middle west. It is an agricultural state, and the conditions of life are, or have been until recently, much the same for all." There were no millionaires or paupers, mansions or hovels. Its people formed a single class. Kansans, Becker noted, were united on the basis of an "identity of race and uniformity of custom," and from their perception of themselves as unique and different from

others. "The Kansas spirit," he proposed, "is the American spirit double distilled. It is a new grafted product of American individualism, American idealism, American intolerance. Kansas is America in microcosm. . . . Within its borders, Americanism, pure and undefiled, has a new lease of life. It is the mission of this self-selected people to see to it that it does not perish from off the earth."²¹

Middle America—all America, real America—was shaped thus by the frontier and its workings that produced the region's people and their character. These were singular, uniform, constant. They were revealed in the people's racial makeup, in their beliefs, in their practices. Bedrock American values thrived there, in middle America, in agrarian America, where Americanism, "pure and undefiled," found a new lease on life. Neither America's East and West coasts, nor its continental borders north and south, could, like Oz's Wonderful Wizard, conjure a magic equal to that of the Midwest. In truth and by contrast, the nation's exterior rim, as viewed from the heartland, recall a messier, more contentious, and even fatal ground.

But all is not well in the heartland. In its differentiation of Americans from those who were not Americans, the agrarian tradition not only promoted nationalism, a legitimate and perhaps necessary precondition for a nation-state, but also stoked a sense of superiority and isolationism. American exceptionalism, as historian Ian Tyrrell has pointed out, or the idea that the United States was unique, separate from Europe and the rest of the world, and an example for other nations to emulate, formed the basis of a resilient nationalist history. Although important, wrote Tyrrell, the nation-state and nationalism are not the totality of history, but they loom large on history's canvas because of "the historian's common-sense observation of the contemporary world" and "the way historical knowledge has been produced." Historical records have been collected, arranged, and deposited in boxes and archives by the state and nation, and they thus condition and encourage certain historical narratives of that state and nation while discouraging others. Historians must break out of those figurative, literal, and confining discourses, exhorted

Tyrrell, by contextualizing national histories within their international or global frames. That project, he contended, does not require a slighting of national histories, but does offer a simultaneous and equal consideration of the local, national, and transnational.²² In addition to historical parochialism, American exceptionalism is simultaneously a claim to difference or uniqueness and a move that centers and elevates some Americans while marginalizing and denigrating others.²³

The agrarian tradition, then, simultaneously advanced nationalism and sectionalism, differentiating the New World from the Old, the West from the East, the interior from the coasts. The oceans and their shores, according to this tradition, formed protective moats and embankments that allowed the American variety to germinate and grow, shielding it from foreign tides and blights. But there was a countervailing narrative, Henry Nash Smith informs us, a maritime tradition that extended outward, connecting Americans to their European forebears and original stock.²⁴ Although apparently at odds one with the other, the maritime tradition in fact complemented the agrarian tradition insofar as America's peoples, as a racialized group, and their institutions and culture all derived from Western European antecedents. The American, whether descending from agrarian or maritime pasts, is essentially European according to these narratives of nation.

A version, perhaps dominant, of the maritime tradition holds that America is the western terminus of an Atlantic civilization comprised of European "cultural hearths" and their trans-Atlantic diasporas and transplantations. Columbus's first landing in 1492 was the start of that Atlantic civilization. From its shores and points of view, Europe was the center, the original, the authenticating source from which flowed peoples, cultures, and institutions. Herbert Baxter Adams, one of Frederick Jackson Turner's professors at Johns Hopkins University, was an influential advocate of the "germ theory" that held that all American institutions derived from medieval Germany and spread with European migrants to the New World. Indeed, Turner's frontier hypothesis turned on its head his mentor's germ theory by

reversing the origin and direction of American identity and institutions; according to Turner, these arose in the American interior and spread to the coast and thence from the New World to the Old.²⁵ Turner's version of the agrarian tradition simply privileged the American side of a European story.

Thomas Jefferson, a man of the soil and an American centrist, also understood that Americans were an Atlantic and European people. A true nationalist, he called that relationship the "American system," which envisioned a cord of republican kinship, achieved through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revolutions, tying together the nations bordering the north Atlantic while also setting them apart from the despotisms of central and eastern Europe. About a hundred years later, Henry Adams named that transatlantic correspondence the "Atlantic system," binding the north Atlantic nations in a "community of interest." And Forrest Davis, writing on the eve of America's entry into World War II, argued that the Atlantic system was "old, rational, and pragmatic," that its roots ran "deep and strong into the American tradition," and that it had emerged from "strategic and political realities."²⁶ More recent studies of Atlantic civilization, like their forebears, reflect the light of contemporary concerns and perspectives in more balanced treatments for both sides of the Atlantic, greater stresses on the differences as well as commonalities within the Atlantic community, an acknowledgment that Atlantic civilization's development was built in large part upon Africa and Latin America's underdevelopment, and in complex figurations of the Atlantic community as both North and South, white and black, and bi- and multilateral between and among Europe, the Americas, and Africa.²⁷

The maritime tradition, thus, has the salutary effect of placing the United States within a more global orbit of Atlantic civilization and asks how Africans and America's indigenous peoples were drawn into European civilization. And unlike the agrarian tradition, it now proposes a history transcendent of nation that has neither national boundaries nor the binaries of Old and New World and white and black. The black Atlantic, the cultural critic Paul Gilroy proposes, transgresses the categories of nation, race,

and ethnicity and is emphatically and mutably mixed and hybrid.²⁸ But like its land-based counterpart, the maritime tradition is incomplete. Slighted are the lands north and south of the United States, the native peoples of the Americas whose histories long preceded the advent of Europe's Atlantic civilization, and Asians who like Africans were transported to labor in the Americas by Europeans and thereby added complexity to the multicultural black Atlantic. And the Atlantic world, however inclusive, still centers Europe and the expansion of its peoples and their deeds upon indigenous Africa and the Americas wherein whites act upon nonwhites.

The Asian American subject, pushed to the foreground of American history, helps us to rethink both the agrarian and maritime traditions. It reminds us that the United States and the Americas are surely elements of the Atlantic world or the black Atlantic, but also are parts of a Pacific world that, like its Atlantic correlate, was a system of flows of capital, labor, and culture that produced transnational and hybrid identities as well as their counterclaims for homogeneity, nationalism, and racial purity. In that sense, the United States is an island surrounded by lands north and south, but also oceans east and west. And as an island, in contrast to the imagined insularity of the agrarian tradition, the United States must be viewed not only as a center with its own integrity but also as a periphery and fluid space of movements and engagements that resist closure and inevitable outcomes. Further, the Midwest and the United States as a whole were never wholly exceptional, homogeneous, or isolated from other regions of the country or the world. The nation's interiors were bound to its coasts and borders, which in turn were bound to the world beyond. The history of Asians in America points out that U.S. history and the American identity are local, national, and transnational in scope, are complex and heterogeneous, and are both inward- and outward-looking, as advanced by both the agrarian and maritime traditions.²⁹

In truth, as figured in Atlantic civilization, America's very "discovery" resulted from a transnational project—Europe's ancient and persistent search for a passage to Asia. As noted by

Christopher Columbus in his ship's daily log, his expedition's purpose was to go "to the regions of India, to see the Princes there and the peoples and the lands, and to learn of their disposition, and of everything, and the measures which could be taken for their conversion to our Holy Faith."³⁰ Columbus, we know, was not the first European who sought the goods and wealth of Asia, but followed a long line of invaders, traders, and dreamers that might have begun with the ancient Greeks of the fifth or fourth century B.C.E.³¹

Asia, according to cultural theorists Edward W. Said and Mary B. Campbell, was Europe's other.³² Asia was a source of Europe's civilizations and languages, the site of its oldest and richest colonies, and its political and cultural contestant. Orientalism, writes Said, was a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over" Asia. Within its lexicon, Asians were inferior to and deformations of Europeans, whose purpose was to stir an inert people, give them form, and bestow upon them an identity. Those gendered representations, wherein Europeans are rendered as men and Asians as women, justified Europe's colonization of Asia by which European men aroused, penetrated, and domesticated the passive, dark, and vacuous "Eastern bride," according to Said.³³

Orientalism, as Said and the historian Ronald Takaki have pointedly argued, is not a mere discourse of representations, but also supports Europe's and America's masculine thrust toward a feminized Asia—their invasion, conquest, and colonization of Asia.³⁴ Like Europe's trans-Atlantic diasporas, America's westward march across the frontiers and expanses deemed central to the American epic by the agrarian tradition was, from the Asian American standpoint, an extension of Europe's pursuit after "fabulous" Asia. Not merely inward-bound, the frontier's prairie schooners and wagon trains were like ships that had originated in Europe, docked on the East Coast of the United States, and continued on into the interior and to the West Coast, but also sailed on to Hawaii and Asia.

Jefferson's quest for an overland passage to India might have lain in the realm of imagination, but America's Asian destiny

was already a seaborne reality and well under way. Soon after the Republic's founding, on George Washington's birthday in 1784, the *Empress of China* sailed from New York City's harbor, bound for Asia. A "Great Number of Inhabetants," wrote the ship's captain John Green in his log, "Salluted us by giveing Three Cheers," as the *Empress*, with its cargo bay filled with New England ginseng, slipped from its mooring and sailed toward the open sea. The *Empress of China*, "fitted out partly at the expense of Robert Morris, merchant prince and 'financier of the American Revolution,' sailed from New York to Canton, carrying the American flag into the midst of the Dutch and British pennants that fluttered in the breezes of Chinese waters," historian Charles A. Beard wrote. "Before the Fathers completed the framing of the Constitution, at least nine voyages had been made to the Far East by enterprising Yankees." In the year of Washington's inauguration, ten ships from Salem, Massachusetts, sailed the waters of the Indian ocean, and on the date of his retirement to Mount Vernon, in 1797, the *Betsy* returned from China with a cargo that netted \$120,000 in profits. In the decade of the 1830s, American trade with China amounted to nearly \$75 million, a sum greater than the total debt of the American Revolution, and America's textile factories saw Asia's fecund shores as markets that would keep "their wheels whirling and coffers full."³⁵

Jefferson's successors, in particular Missouri's Thomas Hart Benton, championed the cause of western expansion. As senator and congressman during the mid-nineteenth century, Benton articulated and advanced his dream of an American empire built upon trade with Asia. Benton, like many midwesterners, connected America's East Coast with Europe, referring to it as "the English seaboard," where the American spirit, he believed, was stifled by Old World traditions, and instead saw the nation's future in the West, where freedom and greatness could be achieved. Asia was a key to that development for Benton, who contended that all of the great European empires were built upon their access to and monopoly of the Asian trade. America's Pacific destiny, declared Benton, would free the nation from European dependence and inferiority, and complete the journey that

Columbus had begun. "The trade of the Pacific Ocean, of the western coast of North America, and of Eastern Asia," he predicted, "will all take its track; and not only for ourselves, but for posterity. That trade of India which has been shifting its channels from the time of the Phoenicians to the present, is destined to shift once more, and to realize the grand idea of Columbus. The American road to India will also become the European track to that region."³⁶

But the course of empire had to be run one race at a time. Even the prophetic Benton could not at first envision America's expansion from sea to shining sea, and instead believed that North America's western lands would comprise a separate nation intermediate between the United States and Asia. His son-in-law, John Charles Fremont, however, played a prominent role in the mapping of the West, the promotion of its American settlement, and the conquest of California. America's invasion and defeat of Mexico and its absorption of Mexico's northern territories in 1848 achieved the first phase of the Republic's (and Europe's) "manifest destiny"; and like Spain's Vasco de Balboa, who traversed the Panamanian isthmus in 1513 and gazed across the Pacific, some of America's leaders viewed a Pacific crossing to the wealth of Asia as the next phase in national expansion. Benton's scheme for American greatness coalesced both the maritime and agrarian traditions in that Asia's products carried on ships would, Benton predicted, land at the nation's western terminus and, during their transcontinental journey to the Northeast, would stimulate the growth of farms, cities, and manufactures within America's interior. "An American road to India through the heart of our country," he proposed, "will revive upon its line all the wonders of which we have read—and eclipse them. The western wilderness, from the Pacific to the Mississippi, will start into life under its touch."³⁷

For Asians touched by European peoples, trade, conquest and colonization, and migration commonly followed contact.³⁸ Some of the first Asian settlers in the Americas came by way of Europe's Asia. Ferdinand Magellan's expedition, from 1519 to 1522, rounded South America's horn, sailed into the Pacific, landed in

the Philippines, and claimed the islands for Spain. Beginning in 1565, Spanish ships sailed between Manila and Acapulco, entrepôts of the Spanish empire, in the galleon trade that exchanged Mexico's silver for Asia's spices, silks, porcelain, and furniture and transported them to the Americas and thence to Europe. On board those galleons were impressed and hired sailors, Filipinos and Chinese, some of whom had jumped ship in Acapulco and found their way to Mexico City and, as early as the 1760s, to the bayous of Louisiana, another of Spain's colonies. In the swamps near New Orleans, these Filipino "Manilamen" founded the oldest, continuous Asian communities in North America.³⁹

Asian Indians, with anglicized names like James Dunn, John Ballay, Joseph Green, George Jimor, and Thomas Robinson, arrived on America's East Coast in Boston and Philadelphia on board British and American trade vessels during the 1780s and 1790s. Some served their indentures; others were sold and bought as slaves. Historian Joan Jensen speculates that those men, when freed, probably married African American women and became members of the local African American communities. A petition filed "about the 1790's" and contained in the records of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society tells the story of James Dunn, an Asian Indian who had been indentured by his parents to an English sailor when he was eight years old. Passed on from owner to owner, Dunn arrived in the American South, where he tried to regain his freedom, believing that he had served the period of his indenture. His owners, however, treated him as a slave, and the Abolition Society's papers do not indicate whether Dunn ever obtained his freedom.⁴⁰ The 1855 New York State census found other Asians who had come to America by way of the Asian trade—Chinese men together with their families, many comprised of Irish women and their biracial offspring, who had been living and working in New York City since the 1820s.⁴¹

Indeed, America's ports fostered a wide diversity of peoples and cultures. On the Atlantic, the crew of the *Pallas*, according to a witness, consisted of "Chinese, Malays, Japanese and Moors, and a few Europeans," when it docked in Baltimore in 1785. On the Pacific, John Meares of the British East India Company sailed

from south China in 1788 with a crew of Chinese shipbuilders, carpenters, metal workers, and sailors. The expedition built a fur-trading and ship-building settlement on Vancouver Island.⁴² Lesing Newman and John Islee, Chinese residents of New York City, were sailors based in that port. Newman was a naturalized U.S. citizen bound for Liverpool, England, in 1835, while Islee sailed to Liverpool in 1847. That same year, China-born Ben Sanchez left New York's harbor for Havana. An 1856 *New York Times* article estimated that there were 150 Chinese, most of whom were sailors, living in lower Manhattan.⁴³

Demographic and economic changes marked the first half of the nineteenth century in America. About the turn of the century, the nation was essentially rural and agrarian, with modest manufacturing and international trade concentrated in the Northeast. But most Americans were farmers, and their economy and outlook were primarily local. Fifty years later, America had gone through an industrial revolution with its resultant rise in population and workforce, the growth of cities and urban centers of manufacturing and trade, transportation innovations, immigration, and a translocal, national integration. And although most Americans still depended upon agriculture for their economic well-being, the context of that activity had expanded from local to national and international market economies.

The nation's edges, primarily the industrial centers of New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia, led the way and exemplified many of those changes. But even its interior, contrary to the homogeneity assumed by the agrarian tradition and heartland boosters, reflected those national trends. Immigration was a significant cause for the dramatic rise in American population, from a mere 4 million in 1790 to 17 million in 1840. Immigrants totaled nearly half of New York City's population by the 1850s, but they also outnumbered native-born Americans in western cities such as St. Louis, Chicago, and Milwaukee.⁴⁴ About the turn of the century, social reformer Jane Addams observed that Chicago's immigrants had laid "the simple and inevitable foundations of an international order" through the cosmopolitan "intermingling of the nations," and African American migrants from the South

had formed vibrant communities in that Midwest metropolis.⁴⁵ Besides those economic and demographic changes, linguists note the falsity of “general American” English, and instead cite the rich language variations that flourish throughout the Midwest.⁴⁶ Those diversities in the heartland, although self-evident and abundant, were easily missed by nationalist myths.

Rather, immigrants and the coast cities to which they seemed to flock constituted an opposition to the supposed homogeneity and tranquility of the interior, and they comprised strange, foreign, and even threatening presences among certain elements of the American imagination of the late nineteenth century. Stirred by the apparent decline of the agrarian ideal and by the intrusion of the noisy machine into America’s pristine garden, critics of the new immigration, industrialism, and expansionism lamented the nation’s apparent turn to materialism, greed, and barbarism. Editor and poet Thomas Bailey Aldrich, an easterner and a parochialist, warned of America’s “Unguarded Gates”:

Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,
 And through them presses a wild motley throng—
 Men from the Volga and the Tartar steppes,
 Featureless figures from the Hoang-Ho,
 Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt, and Slav,
 Flying the Old World’s poverty and scorn;
 These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,
 Those, tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.
 In street and alley what strange tongues are loud,
 Accents of menace alien to our air,
 Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew!
 O Liberty, white Goddess! is it well
 To leave the gates unguarded? On thy breast
 Fold Sorrow’s children, soothe the hurts of fate,
 Lift the down-trodden, but with hand of steel
 Stay those who to thy sacred portals come
 To waste the gifts of freedom. Have a care
 Lest from thy brow the clustered stars be torn
 And trampled in the dust. For so of old

The thronging Goth and Vandal trampled Rome,
 And where the temples of the Caesars stood
 The lean wolf unmolested made her lair.⁴⁷

In a letter dated May 14, 1892, Aldrich confessed: “I went home and wrote a misanthropic poem called ‘Unguarded Gates’ . . . in which I mildly protest against America becoming the cesspool of Europe. I’m much too late, however,” he lamented. “I looked in on an anarchist meeting the other night . . . and heard such things spoken by our ‘feller citizens’ as made my cheek burn. . . . I believe in America for the Americans; I believe in the widest freedom and the narrowest license, and I hold that jail-birds, professional murderers, amateur lepers . . . and human gorillas generally should be closely questioned at our Gates.” Aldrich closed with his endorsement of Rudyard Kipling’s acid observation that New York City had become “a despotism of the alien, by the alien, for the alien, tempered with occasional insurrections of decent folk!”⁴⁸

To some, the immigrant conjured the specter of urban unrest, class conflict, and poverty. In 1880 Boston, according to an alarmed observer, three-fifths of the population were foreign born, and in the mid-1880s there were 555 strikes.⁴⁹ Chicago’s Haymarket bloodshed of 1886, called “the work of a lot of pathological Germans and Poles” by the Harvard philosopher William James, was just one of several major labor clashes in the late nineteenth century. Perhaps most influential was the Pullman strike of 1894 that affected thousands of railroad workers in twenty-seven states and territories and paralyzed transportation from Chicago to the West Coast. Over the objections of Illinois’s governor, President Grover Cleveland ordered 2,000 federal troops in the Chicago area to arrest the strike’s leaders, including Eugene V. Debs, president of the American Railway Union, and to enforce a court injunction forbidding the strike.

Just as immigrants were linked to class conflict, so were they paired with poverty. “In the poorest quarters of many great American cities and industrial communities one is struck by a most peculiar fact—the poor are almost entirely foreign born,”

declared Robert Hunter, a social worker, in his classic 1904 text, *Poverty*. The alien poor, according to Hunter, formed “colonies, foreign in language, customs, habits, and institutions” and were distinguished from “American groups” by ethnicity and race. In New York City, there were “colonies” of Irish, Jews, Italians, Russians, Poles, Greeks, Syrians, Chinese, and African Americans. “The rich and well-to-do are mostly Americans; the poor are mostly foreign, drawn from among the miserable of every nation,” Hunter wrote. “To live in one of these foreign communities is actually to live on foreign soil. The thoughts, feelings, and traditions which belong to the mental life of the colony are often entirely alien to an American.” Although they were living in America, he argued, they were not of America. Besides being mired in poverty, poor immigrants introduced entirely new racial casts to the American gene pool, and Hunter predicted that “racial modifications . . . are likely to result from the coming of these strange peoples from all parts of the world.”⁵⁰ The connections, thus, were the alien, with the impoverished, with racial (genetic) decline.

When America embarked upon its “new frontier” and “new empire” in the Pacific during the late nineteenth century, during which America annexed and conquered the Philippines and Hawaii in 1898, and in 1899 it began its “Open Door” policy with China, when, in the words of Secretary of State John Hay, the nation’s “Far West” became the “Far East,” race, ethnic, gender, class, and ideological diversities had to be subsumed beneath the banner of empire. Imperialism bred conformity, not individualism. Hay conceived of America’s imperial role in the Pacific as a trans-Atlantic alliance of the United States and Britain, as the bond of “the two Anglo-Saxon peoples” engaged in “the same sacred mission of liberty and progress.”⁵¹ Writing of this period and of America’s pursuit of empire, historian Nell Irvin Painter noted “a vastly increased emphasis on race” that aligned white America with the European colonial powers set against African Americans and other peoples of color in the colonized world. Domestic divisions and expansion abroad, Painter observed, demanded “an identity as well as an identity of interest” that

excluded America's racialized, gendered, and classed minorities and helped create transnational identities of white and non-white.⁵² The Republic's diversity notwithstanding, the myths of homogeneity and a racialized order of "whiteness" contra "non-whiteness" at the end of the nineteenth century suited the allied purposes of domestic order and subjugation abroad.

That essentializing of whiteness, set against its nonwhite other, was imagined by British historian Charles H. Pearson in his tract, *National Life and Character*, published in 1893, the same year of Turner's frontier essay. Whites, he explained, had expanded to the farthest reaches of the temperate zones and, he noted, like Turner, there were no more frontiers left except in the thickly populated tropics, where black and yellow peoples lived and where diseases impeded white settlement. But whites, desirous of the products of the tropics, colonized those areas and introduced science and industry that not only enabled a more efficient production but also lengthened the life spans of nonwhites. The result, predicted Pearson, would be a huge population explosion among nonwhites accompanied by a rise in their power, and, led by Asians, the surging masses would challenge white overrule and spread into the temperate, white zones.⁵³ That empire that conveyed sugar and bananas to Europe and the United States also brought immigrants, prompting an anguished cry for simpler pasts, racial and cultural homogeneity, and higher fences to repel the immigrant tide at the end of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁴

Asian American history reveals a more inclusive and complex past than admitted by those nationalist, tribal, and introspective narratives. The familiar spatial dualisms of an agrarian set against a maritime tradition, the heartland as opposed to the coasts, and the Atlantic but not Pacific civilizations and their national, class, racial, and gender correlates and dualisms of American and European, citizen and alien, rich and poor, white and nonwhite, and manly Americans and feminine Asians, are false propositions and choices. Not either or, all of those spaces and social categories were formative and constitutive of the American character. America's very origins and its subsequent expan-

sion, we come to see clearly through the lens of the Asian American subject, was the result of a transoceanic and transcontinental journey to India embarked upon by Europeans. Islanders washed by the Atlantic and the Pacific and touched by lands north and south, Americans were equally a continental and an oceanic peoples, both an Atlantic and a Pacific civilization. And the nation's borders, gates, and shores were more open and permeable than a moat and embankment would allow. Indeed, as Pearson recalled and foresaw, the European penetration and colonization of Asia motivated and conveyed Asian peoples to America's shores, and the influences they and other migrants brought to bear on the port cities and cultures of America's rim were as much a part of America's social fabric and formation as the imagined, less complicated frontier, where the environment was said to have shaped a singular "new man."

Geographies are neither predetermined nor fixed. The term the West, for instance, at different times and from various standpoints in U.S. history, might have designated the Americas, the lands beyond the Appalachian mountains, the Midwest, the Far West, North America, Europe and sometimes even Japan. We also realize that spaces, when marked by humans, carry socially assigned meanings. Thus, the West in American history was associated with vacancy, virginity, genesis, fertility, timelessness, fidelity, homogeneity, wellness, regeneration, agriculture, and plenty—in sum, an Americanism pure and undefiled. Like Dorothy's Kansas, the West is home. Spaces, thus, are freighted with significances that we ascribe to them. There could be multiple Wests, and multiple homes—West and East, the heartland and the coasts, rural and urban, field and factory, farmer and industrial worker. Must one or the other claim the solitary position of truth, authenticity, privilege? Could not both and all exemplify the "truly American"? Might not the contrasts be more imaginary than real, as in the land of Oz, or might there be commonalities in differences? And precisely where are the borders and barriers that distinguish and isolate farmer from industrialist, interior from coast, Kansas from Oz, America from Asia, West from East?